

# Hearings on Religious Persecution in Sudan: Bishop Macram Max Gassis Oral Testimony

February 15, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

BISHOP GASSIS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am really honored to be surrounded by Dr. Francis, who is from my diocese, and Dr. Gaspar Biro, whom I have known for so many years when I used to testify at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, and I am sure he will highlight exactly what I have been saying. He did in the past--he spoke about religious persecution, slavery, and other things.

We the Bishops of East Africa, or EMASEA, which stands for Episcopal Conference of East Africa, had our meeting in Nairobi, and we came out with an appeal to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, copied to the Holy See, copied to the American Bishops' Conference, copied to the Senate and the Congress, copied to the European Parliament. And we spoke very clearly this time as pastors. We cannot use diplomacy or smooth words just to say that the issue of the Sudan can be tackled in this way. We have to be blunt; we cannot sugarcoat our words anymore. What is at stake are the lives of thousands and thousands of people.

We are aware of the devastating civil war in our country and mindful of our responsibility as Bishops to discuss among other things the question of war and peace in Sudan.

We noted with great concern the devastating consequences of what is happening in our country. And I list them. We noted with regret certain practices which undermine the dignity and worth of the human person. In particular, we deplore the extra-judicial punishment, disappearances, slavery, and slavery-related practices, torture, restriction on freedom of worship, lack of freedom of expression, discriminatory laws, practices and attitudes, manipulation of the media, lack of a genuine dialogue between Christians and Muslims. We disapprove of the use of the food for faith or as a weapon. And particularly, we highlighted the issue of the Nuba Mountains.

As you said, Mr. Chairman, the President made a statement, and I thank him, and I say finally, the leadership of the United States is speaking in our favor--finally.

I am not a politician, and I am not a diplomat. I am a pastor, and therefore, I don't use diplomatic expressions. Maybe I am too rough, but that is what I should be.

With deep concern and dismay, I have learned from my Diocesan staff that the Islamic fundamentalist regime of Khartoum has once again unleashed its deadly bombs on the innocent civilian population of the Nuba Mountains and their social institutions, maintained with such heroic effort in the midst of war. And as so often before, the forces of Khartoum have targeted the most vulnerable and most precious of our resources--our children. We do not have gold; we do not have money to invest in banks. Our capital investment is our children. They are the future of the Church, they are the future of the country.

On February 7th and 8th, two Russian-built Antonov bombers targeted the heavily populated areas around Kauda. The Catholic Church has set up the only well-established school in the area, with more than 360 students. Fourteen of these students were killed outright in the raid, and the number of wounded is yet to be fully determined. Even this morning, I was in contact with Nairobi, with my headquarters. The information available to me at this time suggests that we will lose yet more young lives as a result of this deliberate and barbarous assault.

Truly, this is a slaughter of innocents, an unbridled attempt to destroy the Nubas' hope and indeed their future by destroying their children.

I have tried time and again to tell the world that the National Islamic Front regime in Khartoum has been and is conducting a campaign of genocide aimed at exterminating the Christian, African, and non-Arab populations of Sudan in order to establish a uniform Arab-Islamic fundamentalist free state in the heart of Africa.

This terrible, heart-breaking incident is yet another piece of evidence, if

more were still needed, that the war in Sudan is a religious--and I underline, it is religious--and ethnic war launched by Khartoum and aimed at the destruction of my people.

We cannot take back the 14 martyred children under the trees in Kauda. My dear brothers and sisters, there are many Rachels today in the Nuba Mountains weeping for their children. What we can do is call upon the international community to refuse to stand idly by while the African and Christian peoples of the Sudan are exterminated. Stand with us. Don't pity us. We do not want to be pitied. We want to be loved. And love means courage, love means strength, love means donation of one's time and one's resources.

Many people argue whether the issue in the Sudan is religious or not, and I start by listing, from independence in 1956 to present day, the Arab-Muslim governments have implemented the following--the confiscation of all missionary schools, both Catholic and Protestant, in Southern Sudan and other parts of the country. The number of schools confiscated is 750. These schools have dedicated most of the political leadership of the South. We have here today Dr. Francis Deng, who is one of them.

They also introduced Friday as the day of rest instead of Sunday in the South. And when students and leading Christian Southerners demonstrated and rejected this operation, they were tortured and jailed.

In 1964, the Khartoum Government promulgated the infamous law known as the "Missionary Societies Act," the purpose of which is to cripple the growth of the churches. We are expected to register at our churches and our institutions on an annual basis just as grocery shops or companies or NGO's. When I denounced this at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, the representative of the Khartoum regime stood up and said: To honor the visit of the Holy Father, we are going to revise this law. Discriminatory laws do not have to be revised. They have to be abrogated in toto.

What happened? The revised law is worse than the previous one.

In 1964, the expulsion of all Catholic and Protestant missionaries from the South and the Blue Nile Province. Church personnel were herded like cattle on cargo trucks; they were not even given ample time to hand over their responsibilities to the meager number of local church personnel.

They created the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowment. In my judgment, it is not the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowment which should facilitate the work of Christians and Muslims alike. I call it the "Ministry of Islamic Affairs." This set-up is meant to scrupulously implement the Missionary Societies Act and foster the spread of Islam and Islamic institutions and centers at the expense of Christianity in the country.

From the Minister to the gatekeepers, all were Muslim, although they did employ a Christian for a short period, but he was just a mere rubber stamp. Expatriate missionaries were not allowed to come in. Churches were not allowed to be repaired. New permits for other churches were not given. And this is part of the Missionary Societies Act.

Then comes the promulgation of the Islamic Sheria [ph.] Law, whereby we become second-class citizens--flogging of people, fines, imprisonment. Take, for example, an incident of Bishop Butros el Birish [ph.], who was flogged publicly on a trumped charge of adultery.

The regime armed tribal militias with automatic weapons and created the so-called Islamic Militia Mujahideen. They are to go to the South to attack the innocent Dinka Nuba, loot their villages and crops, kill their elders, abduct and enslave their children, rape their girls or take them as concubines.

My brothers and sisters, if this is not religious oppression and ethnic discrimination, then what else should we call it? We cannot hide our heads by saying it is merely a political and economic issue. The issue of race is a major problem. The issue of religion is a major problem.

I have a suggestion, and my recommendation is very clear. The time has come when the Christian leadership should speak out, and steps have got to be taken. We are not going to wait until another 6 million are going to be exterminated like the Jews, and then the international community will say: We are sorry.

We have entire ethnic groups jeopardized by this ethnic extermination. Why is Kosovo

mentioned, Bosnia, the Middle East, and we in Sudan are not mentioned?

My recommendation is for aerial exclusion zones. Operation Lifeline Sudan, or OLS, should be taken from under the clothes of the Khartoum regime in order to reach all affected areas so that Khartoum will not use food for Arabization and Islamization.

We need monitors in the area as they have sent to other areas. Let them come. I am ready to accompany them. And by the way, it is not only Kauda that was bombed; also, Gidel [ph.] was bombed. This is the latest news I received this morning.

Brothers and sisters, I bring you the voice of my brothers, the Bishops of Sudan. I bring you the voice of all of your brothers in Sudan. Come and save us. We are not asking you to carry our cross. Each person has to carry his own. We are asking you only to help us carry it.

I will conclude my statement by citing a poem. Pray for me. Pray for me, my dear brothers, to be given an opportunity to open my mouth and fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel of which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that in proclaiming it, I may speak fearlessly as I ought to. And God bless you.